# The Way It Was

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**UNIT:** 11th Medical Regiment
**TIME PERIOD:** 1936-1938
**SOURCE:** Account written by Mr. Templeton
**DATE RECEIVED:** October 3, 2001

I enlisted in the U.S. Army (choosing the Medical Corps) on December 10, 1935, in Trenton, New Jersey. We were allowed to choose between the States, Panama, Alaska, and Hawaii for our service tour. Boot camp was at Ft. Slocum, New York.

On March 14, 1935, I left Brooklyn, New York, with a temperature of 15 degrees below zero, on board the U.S. Army Transport Republic. This ship was originally a British liner and was seized by the Germans during WWI. The U.S. seized it from the Germans during the War, using it for a transport ship. There were 1,800 troops on board. Of course, there were no troop transport airplanes at this time flying over the ocean.

We went through Cape Hataras, a sever storm tearing a barnacle off the bow of the ship, resulting in our having to close off one bulkhead.

We docked in Colon, Panama, five days later, with a temperature of over 100 degrees with very high humidity (quite a change from 15 degrees below zero in Brooklyn). We had shore leave that evening in Cristobal, having to report back by 11:00 p.m. We left Colon the next morning and proceeded through the Locks via Lake Gutun from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, which took eight hours. We then went through more locks, docking at Balboa, Panama. As we waited for shore leave we were told that spinal meningitis had broken out on board ship and we would be quarantined in Ft. Clayton, Panama for eleven days. Two men died of the disease.

While we were in quarantine the large hole in the ship from the barnacle was repaired in dry dock.

We left Panama going up the coast of Central America and California on up to San Francisco. We were there five days when sailed on to Honolulu, Hawaii. While in the middle of the journey, we lost a propeller, continuing on with only one. (On the ship's 13th trip, the one prior to our crossing, the Captain was lost overboard).

We arrived at Aloha Tower on May 10 (approximately). The U.S.A.T. republic was the largest ship that could be docked there at that time. We were greeted by many women doing the hula and selling leis. Shipmates were throwing coins in the water and natives were diving for them. The docks had a wonderful aroma of flowers.

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We walked to the train in downtown Honolulu to take us to Schofield Barracks, where 25,000 servicemen were based. The only servicewomen were in the nurse corps working in the hospital. Honolulu consisted of two traffic lights at that time, one being at Fort and King Streets. There were only a few hotels in Waikiki, the Moana and Royal Hawaiian were the largest. There were only a few scattered homes (shacks) between Honolulu and the base. There were no businesses at all. The road was tar and gravel.

We were assigned to our barracks, which were in a wooden structure with open front, screened-in porch all the way through, with only windows in the back to prevent rain from coming in. We were given our khaki and fatigue uniforms (which were blue denim, including the hat).


Had boot training. We were asked what kind of jobs we would like to have, and naturally all wanted a truck-driving job! But the people who wanted a driving job got a wheelbarrow to use. All were assigned to regular jobs, me being appointed an ambulance driver. I was responsible for my own ambulance (#33413), which had to be kept clean and ready for use at all times. We even had to keep the undercarriage of the vehicle washed. This vehicle was a 1936 ford ambulance, which at that time was a delivery truck, with the open doors in the back, linoleum on the floor and there were four stretchers mounted on the inside of the walls (two on each side). You just picked them off the wall and carried them. The ambulances were olive green Army color, with a red cross on the side.

I was also assigned a Dodge transport truck, similar to what is used today. Later on I was relieved of the truck temporarily, being assigned to a 1939 Ford car. I was chauffeur to the attending doctor, Captain Baird, for a few months. His duties included doctoring only servicemen with families on the post. Each day personnel would phone in their "aches and pains"; i.e., even headaches (many times hangovers) and the Captain would go to their homes and treat them, no matter how minor their problem was. If it was serious and ambulance was called.

One day Captain Baird, who lived at Kileau Beach, was Officer of the Day. He told me to go down with his car and get his wife and child and bring them up to the base; I told him I did not have a territorial license. He said he would give me a note stating his permission. I picked them up and on the way back his wife wanted to stop at Wahiawa at Castner's Department Store, one

mile from base. It started to rain, so I pulled up on the left-hand side of the street and let her and the child out. She said she would only be a minute.

While I waited, two civilian police pulled up and told me I was on the wrong side of the street. (Army personnel and civilian police were always enemies). I explained that Mrs. Baird would be right out. They asked to see my driver's license. I showed them my Army license. They wanted to see my Hawaii license and I told them I didn't have one and showed them the note. They dismissed this and said it "didn't count." They told me to leave the car sit there and they would move it. They left and went around the corner and Mrs. Baird came out and got in the car, telling me to take off. The police caught me just before I got to the base gate. They took the car and Mrs. Baird home and they took me back to the Wahiawa police station. If Mrs. Baird had not sent the military police to the police station to rescue me, they would have locked me up. They insisted I buy a territory license for $15.00, which was almost a month's pay!

November 11, 1935, (Armistice Day) I was driving Captain Baird to Wheeler Field (this was before there was an Air Force Corps). We saw an airplane come down into a power dive, but unfortunately it went right into the ground; it did not explode. The pilot, who was married and had a small baby, was killed, with every bone in his body broken. That afternoon they ordered all planes in the air, with somewhat of an air show, so that other pilots would not lose their courage.

In 1937, pilots were practicing dropping bombs on targets over guava patches. We were watching the planes and saw one that the wings fell off and then heard a large boom. The ambulances immediately went up there and discovered the plane had fallen in flames near the target. They found out later that the trap had opened to release the bomb, but the bomb caught in the net and exploded. After the fire was out and the dead pilot removed, they found one bomb that had not gone off.

There were twelve wards in the base hospital, among them one was assigned to critical care, another for venereal disease. There was also a morgue and medical laboratory. One memorable experience for me was when a private was on guard duty for 24 hours, being relieved at noontime. He ate dinner and went to the latrine, planning to commit suicide with his 30/30 rifle. He put it to his chest, however, when he pulled the trigger it went into his side. He was taken to the hospital with around-the-clock guards to prevent him from trying again. I was one of the guards. I had to shave him so he wouldn't use the razor to harm himself. One day when I was shaving him he stated "I didn't know how important life is, I will never try it again." He got a medical discharge and was sent home when he recuperated.

Another memorable incident was when a Staff sergeant shot himself through the head one night. While transporting him to the hospital the officer on duty said there was no urgency because he probably would not live until he got to the hospital. He did survive, and Major Thomas operated on him and found that a portion of the brain had been damaged. They removed some of this brain in the surrounding area. Four months later he was sent back to the States in good health. It had not permanently affected him.

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All deaths required an "autopsy." (Not a medical diagnosis like today's autopsies.) This involved removing all the organs, including the brain, stuffing the torso and skull with cotton soaked in formaldehyde and sewing the body back up. The body was put in a reed basket and taken to Fort Ruger to be returned to the States. It would sometimes be 2-3 months before the remains arrived back in the States, perhaps waiting weeks for a ship to take it back.

In 1936, we went on maneuvers for two weeks with 1916 GMC ambulances, resembling a closed wagon. They had no battery, but magnetos, and had to be cranked. Their headlights were carbide gas. The side doors were like barn doors; they rolled on a track. A red cross was on the side. We were told they did not want the vehicles in running condition when we returned. As long as they were in running condition they could not get them replaced with new ones. So we had fun trying to comply with these orders! We were using WWI tanks and other equipment. All this old equipment was replaced when we returned from maneuvers. Our ambulances were replaced by a fleet of Chevrolet ambulances. Everyone was aware that war was eminent and updated equipment and technology was necessary.


I was paid $21 a month. Laundry cost $0.75 a month; Old Soldier's Home was $0.25 a month. I went to the movies; a book of 20 movie tickets was $2.00. I also went to the base gym to workout and played cards for fun (I did not gamble). Wednesday afternoons were always for swimming. We took a convoy of trucks to Haleiwa Beach; I drove one of the trucks. This beach was considered "Soldier's Beach." We always went swimming on Christmas and New Year's Day.

In mid-January 1938 at about 10:30 p.m. I had been to the day room writing letters and had just gone back to my bunk. Everybody else was asleep. My buddy Byron York, from Purvis, Miss., had a brindle dog (servicemen were allowed dogs in the barracks then) that slept on a chair between our bunks. When I got into bed I heard a noise and thought it was the dog scratching fleas. Our building was an open wooden structure that started to creak; then I realized it was an earthquake. I yelled "earthquake" to waken the others and jumped through the window, catching my shirt on a hook. The others all got out the doors or windows. The electric light poles were swaying. There was not major damag3e or injuries. Sergeant Gerber and his wife were at the NCO Club and he had encouraged Mrs. Gerber to drink a glass of wine. When feeling the earthquake she said "If wine does this to you, I am not drinking any more."

One weekend when we had a pass on Friday night for Saturday and Sunday, Charles Lasher, Frank Lovely and I got a pass and took our pup tents and gear and went up on Waianae Mountain, above Kolekole Pass. It was dark by the time we got to the top so we pitched our tents and didn't get back until Saturday afternoon. They had sent airplanes to hunt us.

In 1937 we were on maneuvers; I was driving the reconnaissance car (1929 Ford sedan) and we were supposed to camouflage them. I drove into the bushes and pulled the bushes back up so no tracks were showing. Later when we were to return, I had difficulty finding my vehicle. I was given a commendation for having it camouflaged so well.

The post had a gold course and polo ground. Billy Mitchell, world champion golfer at that time, played the course and I was required to have my ambulance on hand. The movie stars, Buddy Rogers and Mary Pickford, had just gotten married and were honeymooning in Hawaii. They were playing polo. As the ambulance driver and first aid person I had to bandage his hands from playing polo. He hollered and danced around with pain when we put Mercurochrome on the blisters!

On May 1, 1937 Helen Keller appeared at the Royal Hawaiian Palace to celebrate May Day. We saw her and heard her speak through her interpreter, Miss Sullivan.

We always counted our days remaining, starting on our arrival. Men would holler out how many days they had left, regardless if you were a "short" or "long"-timer. I had gone away from home to work on a farm for the summer when I was 8 ½ so I was used to being away from home and did not get homesick. Many did get seriously homesick, causing some even to commit suicide.

I left Schofield Barracks to come home on May 10, 1938, on the same transport ship I come over on, the U.S.A.T. Republic. I was happy it was a large ship. Many others on smaller ships got very seasick. I did not see anybody sea sick going over to Hawaii, but many of us got sick just leaving port after hitting bad storms. We traveled back to San Francisco, California, being stationed at Angel Island for five days. Then we passed back through the Panama Canal and returned to the Brooklyn Army Base, where I was discharged.

On the very day I arrived home in New Jersey, I visited my brother, where I met a beautiful young woman, whom I married a year later and had 12 children.